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Editor's Notebook

This issue of *Rural Development Perspectives* brings articles on the population rebound in rural America, the rural poor, State and local governments' budgets and strategies, rural education, and the new Telecommunications Act. Kenneth M. Johnson and Calvin L. Beale begin with an update of the population rebound that rural areas have enjoyed in the 1990's. Recent growth has renewed the deconcentration of the 1970's after the slowdown of the 1980's. Growth has come less from natural increase than from migration from metro areas and foreign countries.

Welfare reform has brought about a rethinking of the Federal Government's role in welfare programs. Mark Nord examines payments under the Food Stamp and Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) programs to see if benefits were being distributed equitably between States and within States. The Food Stamp Program, unlike AFDC, has standard eligibility and benefit levels nationwide. Food stamp benefits were distributed without any disadvantage to rural areas or racial or ethnic minorities. On the other hand, States with high rural or minority populations received relatively less in AFDC benefits, although within those States, the funds were distributed equitably.

Welfare benefits are important in ensuring adequate diets for poor people, but the rural poor often have less convenient access to supermarkets and large grocery stores, where food prices are usually cheaper. Phil R. Kaufman has studied access to food stores by poor households in the Lower Mississippi Delta. He reports that access to larger stores is more difficult than that enjoyed by urban or suburban residents. Many poor people in the region must travel over 30 miles to the nearest large food store.

For the past quarter century, the Federal Government has been returning money and responsibility back to State and local governments. The most recent wave of devolution has brought authority without funds. Mildred Warner finds that rural areas not adjacent to metro areas spend more per capita locally than adjacent rural areas but have a harder time raising revenue. State and Federal governments play an important role in redistributing funds according to financial capacity and need.

Debra L. Blackwell and Diane K. McLaughlin compare the educational aspirations and attainments of rural and urban youths. Using national surveys from 1979 and 1990, the authors find that rural youths had slightly lower goals and attainments. Rural girls and boys, however, were influenced by different factors. Education for girls was more closely tied to family background and resources, while for boys, personal achievement and the presence of well-educated role models was more important. Youths from advantaged backgrounds had much higher levels of attainment than those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In 1996, a new telecommunications act was passed, as reported in the June 1997 issue of RDP. In this issue, Randall S. Sell, F. Larry Leistritz, and John C. Allen explore the likely consequences of that act for rural telephone companies. Their survey of small telephone companies shows widespread concern that the new provisions will mostly benefit urban and high-toll customers, leaving most rural customers behind.

Finally, Shanna Ratner reports on a new approach tried recently in Maine to improve the coordination of technical assistance to rural manufacturers. In 1994, the State of Maine set up a multi-agency service team (MAST) to see how much the secondary wood products manufacturing industry would benefit from better coordination of services. Most of the firms chosen for this experiment believed they received useful assistance, but the experience also highlighted some weaknesses in working with individual firms and in getting service providers to work as a team.

Douglas E. Bowers

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